

# WHY ARTS EDUCATION MATTERS

by

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*Note: Ms Perrin is head of one of the oldest secondary art schools in the United States.*

For years, we have watched arts classes give way to the seemingly more “practical” courses that politicians and policymakers assume have a direct link to professional and economic success. But in an increasingly globalized economy, one in which an ability to innovate and to imagine new possibilities is critical to America’s ability to compete, we still train our young people very narrowly to work in an industrialized society.

As the country contemplates reauthorization of the federal No Child Left Behind Act, political and policy leaders must recognize that an education in and through the arts, as a central part of a total school program, allows schools to better address these challenges than a curriculum that defines success as aptitude in literacy and math only.

A recent study from the Center on Education Policy indicates that the No Child Left Behind law, with its limited focus on standardized-test scores, has led, over the last six years, to a 16 percent decline in the time devoted to art and music instruction in public schools. Some may view this as unfortunate but necessary. But the loss of the arts, and all that is learned through participation in the arts, severely limits the kinds of skills and capacities children develop in school. In a word, students are learning less, and what they are learning is only part of what is needed to build a strong workforce and a vibrant citizenry.

My school, the Walnut Hill School in Massachusetts, is one of the oldest secondary schools for the arts in the nation, and home to the National Arts & Learning Collaborative at Walnut Hill. We have joined with others to urge that leaders act wisely and comprehensively when drafting legislation that will affect the K-12 curriculum and the allocation of teachers’ time and attention. Because of the importance of 21<sup>st</sup>-century learning skills, we believe this demands that arts education be made part of the core curriculum.

At a Capitol Hill symposium this past November, a panel of educators, researchers, and policymakers made the case. They pointed specifically to the following five challenges, which demonstrate why learning in and through the arts will better equip students to thrive in this new century.

1. America continues to face declining social engagement and a culture of division. Arts education develops in students a capacity for empathy and collaborative work. The culture of schools where the arts are part of the core curriculum is engaging and positive. In such schools, one finds self-motivated students, greater parental involvement, intensified student and teacher engagement, strengthened collegiate aspirations, and respect for cultural differences.

2. One of the greatest public-health issues in America, it could be argued, is the failure of the education system to provide direction and purpose to young people, particularly adolescents. This results in apathy at best and, at worst, youth violence. Intensive engagement in the arts actively supports the psychological, physical, and social development of preadolescent and adolescent students. Because training in the arts often engages the whole child, it is also effective in schools with student populations that have a wide variety of learning styles, experiences, and backgrounds. It has been shown, for example, to reduce the incidence of such problems as apathy and aggression among students in urban settings.

3. The impact of the “globalization” of culture and commerce in an increasingly interdependent world is not yet being adequately addressed by American educators. Because the arts share a global language and a common culture of training and production, they can provide a ready pathway for global communication. The arts are a universal language, one that bridges cultures and articulates the highest aspirations of humankind.

4. America is in danger of losing its competitive advantage to emerging nations that increasingly use arts education as a learning tool to help nurture and innovative and flexible workforce. The study of the arts promotes the development of such skills and capacities as risk-taking and creative thinking, which are important to success in a globally competitive marketplace. Most American high schools, though, still employ an educational model designed for a 19<sup>th</sup>-century industrial economy, limiting learning to discrete disciplines and focusing on the coverage of content, rather than the development of broader skills and understandings that apply to many contexts.

5. The crisis of this American century is not material or intellectual, but spiritual. Unlike traditional academic disciplines, arts education can support an outcome greater than personal success, cultural advancement, or economic influence. The study of the arts asks young people to consider the meaning, both personal and communal, of the work in which they are engaged. Students working in the arts are by definition connected with their culture. The arts traditionally express and test the highest values of any culture, and are a response to people’s longing for connection to a narrative greater than their own personal stories.

As we take on the challenges and opportunities of this new century, we must not deprive our young people of one of the most valuable tools we possess: the quality of the intellectual, spiritual, cultural, and professional skills developed by an education in and through the arts. If we do, we will not only be failing to provide them an effective 21<sup>st</sup>-century education, but also ignoring the reality of a world in which other nations already are profiting from providing such an education. America, long a global leader in innovation, is so deeply retrograde in its approach to education that it now seems in danger of becoming irrelevant.